Netwatch

BY JIM CARROLL

YOUR GUIDE TO BUSINESS & ACCOUNTING ON THE INTERNET

Home, smart home

For decades now we have heard the promise: someday soon our homes will be "smart." Hollywood has long played into this concept, with countless movies showing people who have one-button control over everything in their homes.

They can easily and automatically turn the lights and entertainment equipment on or off, draw the drapes, water the plants, turn down the thermostat and control virtually every other aspect of the home simply by punching a few buttons on a remote. Press a "romance" button and the mood lights come on with a cool Sinatra song playing in the background.

Of course, few of us today have such capabilities. But believe it or not, technology is finally delivering on the smart-home promise, and it's coming quickly.

My wife and I recently bought a new ski chalet for the upcoming season, and I decided that I would explore the world of home automation as part of the project. There have long been many tools to help you do a variety of interesting things with your home, the most common of which is based upon what is known as X.10 technology. But from my perspective, I wanted to see if I could manage the home in various ways through a simple Web browser.

First up is the issue of home security. Why not install a Webcam to monitor the chalet from afar? For that, I purchased a wireless Webcam from Axis Communications. This is no ordinary, simple Webcam; Axis specializes in the development of very sophisticated home, office and industrial monitoring cameras. I bought a relatively low-end model for a few hundred dollars, but it has some powerful features.

For example, motion detection. I'll be able to set it right in a main hallway, and should there be any motion — such as an unauthorized person breaking into the house — I'll get pictures, video and audio immediately sent to me via e-mail. I could then alert law enforcement officials. I can set things up so that I'm alerted on my BlackBerry, so it's almost as good as being there.

Does the technology work? After purchasing the camera, my sons and I tested it out at home by setting it up in the living room; we then spent a few minutes playing burglar. Sure enough, every time we ran by, I received an e-mail that contained photos and video of our exploits.

Next step is remote management of the temperature in the chalet. We usually head up every weekend, arriving to a chilly environment because we've had the heat turned down during the week. We could go with a seven-day thermostat, but I want to do something more interesting.

That's why I'm currently considering a variety of IP-enabled thermostats. I'd be able to turn on the heat at the chalet through a Web browser prior to our drive up and I'd be able to make sure that we were in a low-fuel burning mode when we're away. We'd also know if there were any power or furnace issues that could cause problems; we suffered through a burst pipe and a flood a few years ago in -30C temperatures, and it was not fun.

Such thermostats have now come down to $200 or less: there's a bunch of them to be explored at the Smarthome website. There's a lot of programming capability emerging with them as well, so my bet is it will be pretty easy to set the thermostat control through my BlackBerry Web browser on the drive up.

The hot tub is next on the list. I'm still looking into that one. Of course, there's a more serious point to all of this than simply cool new technology. As we integrate the devices and items throughout our home with the Internet, we will be able to take on a far more active role in how they are used, which will have a direct impact on energy usage and efficiency.

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